THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF MANITOBA

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister

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THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF MANITOBA

The first Women's Institutes in Manitoba, founded at Morris and Valley River in 1910, were an important innovation for the women of this province. The opportunities for women in rural areas to meet and share ideas or discuss problems were limited, and the institutes filled this void with regular meetings and community service projects. Affiliated with the Provincial Department of Agriculture, the institutes utilized the service of lecturers to develop a sophisticated and much needed educational program. Today, the Women's Institutes are of continuing significance, satisfying the social, cultural and educational needs of rural women.

The Beginning of the Women's Institutes

In the nineteenth century, it was uncommon for people to travel long distances or to make frequent trips. As a result, women in rural areas, in particular, suffered from isolation and loneliness. Limited contact with the outside world also reduced the amount of information these women received, and homemaking skills were often restricted to what a mother could teach her daughter. With very little knowledge of health and sanitary standards, these women did their best to raise their children in what were often primitive living conditions.

As one author observed, it was common to see flies swarming in kitchens where ice boxes were rare and generally inefficient. Superstitions about the "poisonous properties" of the night air meant that windows were kept tightly shut. Open wells contributed to epidemics of typhoid fever. There were very few families that had not lost at least one member to tuberculosis, and children frequently died from the "summer complaint," a disease caused by the use of unsanitary milk.

In 1889, a woman named Adelaide Hunter Hoodless lost her smallest child to the summer complaint. She blamed herself for the death and became convinced that other women should be educated to prevent similar tragedies. In her efforts "to tackle the complacent ignorance of society," Mrs. Hoodless became involved in a number of organizations, including Hamilton's Young Women's Christian Association. She also lectured to many groups on issues related to home economics, sanitation, hygiene and child care. In 1897 she spoke at the Agricultural College in Guelph, Ontario on the need for young women to receive domestic training in public schools. It was here that she attracted the attention of Erland Lee, a farmer and the secretary of the Farmer's Institute of Saltfleet township.

Erland Lee invited Mrs. Hoodless to speak at the Farmer's Institute meeting in Stoney Creek, Ontario and the result was the formation of the first Women's Institute on 19 February 1897. It was clear to those in attendance that if rural men needed an institute to help them farm more efficiently, then rural women certainly needed a similar organization to help them in the sphere of homemaking and motherhood. Consequently, the first regular meeting of the Stoney Creek Women's Institute was held on 25 February 1897, and a constitution was drafted.

The central purpose of the Women's Institute was to unite women in an effort to improve their homes and, collectively, their communities. The belief that "a nation could not rise above the level of its homes" was expressed at the first meeting in Stoney Creek and became a creed adhered to by all Women's Institutes. Moreover, the founding members agreed that their organization would be non-sectarian and non-partisan, so that every woman in the community would be free to join.

In honour of her many achievements, the Federated Women's Institute of Canada bought Adelaide Hunter Hoodless' childhood home. The house, located in South Dumfries, Brant County, Ontario was restored in 1967 as a centennial project and the surrounding area was developed into a park and a picnic ground.

The Women of Manitoba Organize

The example of the Women's Institute at Stoney Creek was followed in other Ontario towns, and expanded past the provincial borders until there were similar organizations from coast to coast. In 1909 when Mrs. Finlay MacKenzie from Morris was visiting her mother in Ontario, she heard of the Women's Institute. Eager to start a similar group in her own town, Mrs. MacKenzie returned to Manitoba and organized a meeting with the help of Mrs. Graham, a woman from Brantford, Ontario who was vacationing in Morris.

The first action taken by the Morris group was to send a resolution to Premier Roblin requesting provincial cooperation and support. The Manitoba government willingly complied as their Department of Agriculture had already been considering the establishment of similar organizations. In 1910 a group of women in Valley River, Manitoba also formed

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The Women's Institute at Hartney, Manitoba, c. 1914

an association modelled on the Ontario Institutes and this additional example demonstrated that the time was ripe for organization across the province.

In 1910 two women from the Manitoba Agricultural College, Miss A. Juniper, Professor of Household Science and Miss M. Kennedy, Professor of Household Art, went on a lecture tour through rural areas. At seventeen of the twenty-three places they visited, the women decided to form local associations, all of which were affiliated with the Department of Agriculture.

Until 1919, the Women's Institutes of Manitoba were known as Home Economics Societies. Initially, decisions pertaining to these societies were controlled by the Director of Extension Services and the President of the Agricultural College. The women involved were restricted to presenting ideas at their Annual Convention. In 1915, however, an Advisory Board was established which included four women elected at the Annual Convention and two appointed by the Minister of Agriculture.

An act passed by the Manitoba legislature in 1913 incorporated the societies and gave them provincial standing. By 1933 this act was amended and the Women's Institutes were reorganized. The province was divided into eight districts, each one representing a number of institutes. The president of each district sat on the Advisory Board, as did two women appointed by the Minister of Agriculture and the Director of the Home Economics Department at the University of Manitoba. In 1941 the number of districts expanded to ten and in 1975 a five-region system was adopted.

The Aims, Programs and Expansion of the Women's Institutes

Almost immediately after their formation, the Home Economics Societies began community service work. One of the first tasks undertaken by many of these groups was to establish rest rooms in towns that served the rural areas. Although it may now seem to have been an unusual priority, the absence of rest room facilities made shopping awkward and inconvenient for women from the surrounding farms. Local Home Economics Societies raised money, and some, such as the one in Deloraine, opened a rest room in a private home, while others, like the one in Birtle, rented space from one of the municipal offices or private businesses.

Education was another important aspect of the societies' work and, prior to 1915, college professors went out to lecture when time permitted. By 1913 the federal government had passed the Agricultural Instruction Act, which made money available for instruction in agriculture and home economics. These funds helped to launch a new program to meet the increased demand for lecturers during World War I, and were used to stimulate increased production of food stuffs. "Short courses" in subjects like canning, dressmaking and millinery were developed. Canning became increasingly important during the war years, as the use of vegetables on the home front made more wheat available for the war effort.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Homemaking School at the Women's Institute, Minnedosa, Manitoba

At the outset, the societies were mainly concerned with issues of child care and home management, but they were quickly drawn into the larger arena of political and social issues. During the First World War, members contributed to the war effort by making various supplies such as socks, pyjamas, sweaters and property bags. They also packed boxes filled with cigarettes and baking and shipped them to soldiers. The Crystal City group even sent books and magazines overseas. Many societies forwarded supplies to military hospitals and provided financial assistance to a host of institutes and leagues such as the Red Cross and the Patriotic Fund.

The Home Economics Societies also became involved in the women's rights and suffrage movement. In 1916 they were a major force pushing the provincial government to amend the Manitoba Dower Act to safeguard the property rights of wives. After the First World War, other programs connected with the political role and rights of women were launched. In 1920, for example, the Foxwarren group had a paper presented to them on "Legal Rights of Manitoba Women," and efforts were made to get women out to vote.

In February 1919 a national convention was called in Winnipeg, with representatives from each province attending. A new national organization was formed called the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada. All provinces adopted the name Women's Institutes for their existing organizations with the exception of Saskatchewan, who chose to retain the title of "Homemakers," and Quebec, who wished the continued use of "Circle des Fermieres." The goals of the national group were a restatement of the aims of the provincial societies — to allow farm and village women an opportunity to gather and discuss their role as both homemaker and citizen.

The Women's Institutes took on international significance in 1917, when Mrs. Alfred Watt of British Columbia introduced the idea to Great Britain. In 1929 representatives of rural women's organizations, under the inspiration of Lady Aberdeen and Mrs. Watt, met with the Interna-

tional Council of Women. The end result was a meeting held at Stockholm, Sweden in June.1933 where the Associated Country Women of the World was formed. Today, the ACWW represents close to nine million women and meets every three years. The Manitoba Women's Institutes have the right to send five delegates to the ACWW conferences.

The dissemination of knowledge remained an important aspect of the institutes' work. Information on home economics was available in several books provided by the Department of Agriculture's circulating library, but the Women's Institutes were not limited to this one source. In 1925 Miss Esther Thompson joined the staff of the Agricultural Extension Service and became editor of the first *Institute News*, a paper published quarterly for members. It discussed the aims and achievements of various institutes and outlined the educational programs of the Extension Service. The paper continues to be published today in much the same format and keeps its readers up-to-date on the activities of the Women's Institute.

Later, as the number of institutes increased, the short courses developed in the era of the First World War no longer met the demand for study. At this point three Manitoba Home Economics graduates were added to the staff of the Extension Service. They prepared lessons on various topics such as personal hygiene, home nursing, theory of foods, principles of cooking, laundry work and sewing.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The 13th Annual Convention of Manitoba's Women's Institutes, June 1923

Changing Times and Changing Priorities

In 1932 the Manitoba government announced that it was no longer able to renew its grant for the Women's Institutes. The end of government funding coincided with the years of the Great Depression, and the Women's Institutes were faced with the challenge of supporting their organization and programs in a time of great need and little money. Although the Depression years were difficult, the institutes persisted and continued to raise money for a variety of causes. Through their efforts, for example, Christmas Cheer hampers were distributed to those in drought areas.

Educational programs were not neglected during the Depression. Lectures on mental health care and thrift were sponsored. The women of the Dauphin Institute invited Dr. F.L. Skinner, a hardy plant specialist from Dropmore, to come and lecture to them on growing fruits and vegetables. Moreover, by 1938 the Women's Institutes, in cooperation with the Manitoba Dental Association and various levels of government, had managed to promote dental clinics in rural areas. This project was one of their most important and successful.

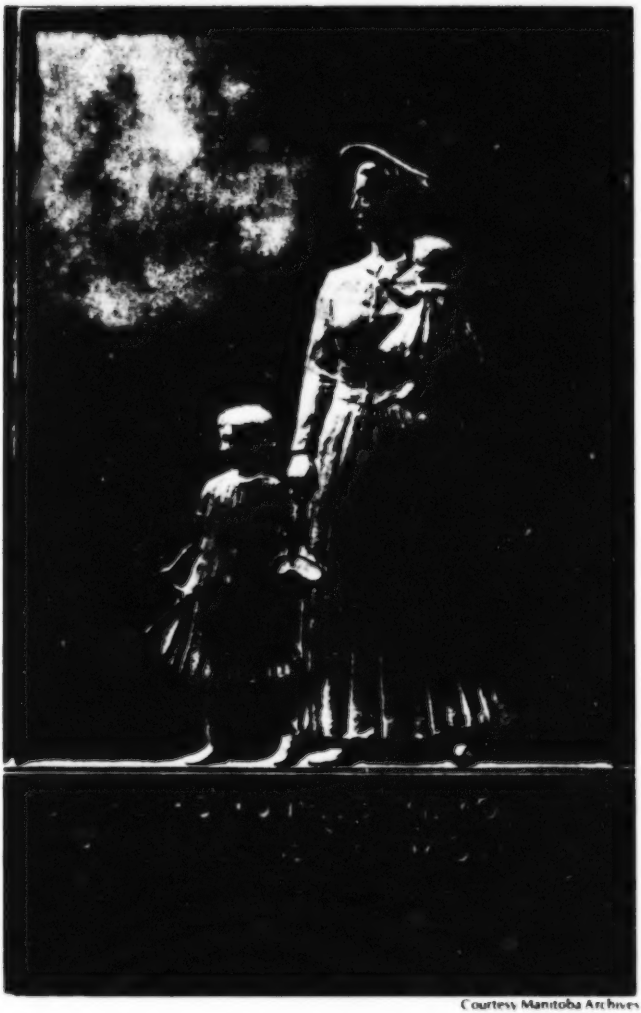
Faced with the hardships of the 1930s, rural women gained an appreciation of the difficulties faced by early settlers. In 1930, on their 21st anniversary, the Women's Institutes of Manitoba decided to commemorate the pioneer mothers of the province by erecting a plaque on the wall to the right of the main entrance hall in the Legislative Building. It shows a mother and two small children, and reads, "To The Honoured Memory of the Pioneer Women."

The outbreak of World War II resulted in another outburst of patriotic activity. The Women's Institutes raised thousands of dollars for the Children's War Service Fund, for air raid victims through the Queen Elizabeth Fund and for the Red Cross. Once again the women rallied together to knit, sew and prepare packages for the enlisted men overseas. When the war ended, the institutes assisted the Department of Health in looking for good rural homes for refugee children. They also applied pressure to the federal and provincial governments to appoint more women to committees for post-war reconstruction and planning.

There were other important campaigns launched by the Women's Institutes in the 1940s. By 1944 they were advocating rural electrification at the price that farm people could afford. They were also quick to point out to the Manitoba Power Commission that women had not been included in the 1946 meeting on electrification. Their educational focus centred around topics such as the health of school children, adult education and the need for women on school boards. Establishing libraries, hospitals, community buildings (such as halls and rinks) and rest rooms also remained key projects.

Health care became a major concern of the Women's Institutes during the 1950s. A study on the living conditions of older citizens was conducted with a special examination of laws regarding pensions. The institutes recommended to the provincial government that staff be made available to senior citizens for recreational and care purposes. The Deloraine group put words into action and, in 1958, remodelled the old Memorial Hospital into a senior citizens' home. Cheap hospital care was another major concern and the Women's Institute pushed for free or subsidized glasses, wheel chairs and hearing aids. The membership also advocated that medical expenses should be made tax deductible.

The 1960s saw new concerns added to the Women's Institute list. They petitioned for suspension of all nuclear testing and urged the provincial government to build a care home for retarded children. Concern for the plight of abandoned wives was expressed and discussions of existing divorce laws were held. More recent problems which have attracted the interest of the institutes include the Garrison River Diversion and its environmental effects, and the impact of aerosol sprays



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A plaque erected by the Women's Institutes, located in Manitoba's Legislative Buildings

on the ozone layer. A major concern for the 1980s is to provide support for the family unit in a time of changing lifestyles.

The Women's Institutes have made important contributions to the cultural life of rural Manitoba. They have been involved in drama festivals since the 1930s, the first of which was held in the area of Manitoba-Killarney, north to Belmont. They have also sponsored music festivals and handicraft fairs. Significant also, has been their interest in

recording rural history. Many local histories could not have been compiled without the help of the area's Women's Institute. Their concern for the preservation of Manitoba's history was best illustrated by one of their 1949 resolutions. In it, the Women's Institutes expressed the belief that Lower Fort Garry should be opened as a public museum.

Over the years the contributions of the Women's Institutes have been substantial. The list of community projects they have undertaken is endless, but a few deserve particular note. Out of concern for the young people and parents of their communities, the Women's Institutes have initiated a number of programs which included serving hot lunches in the schools, providing playground supervision and equipment and maintaining child welfare centres. They have helped to build community halls and skating rinks and have worked to maintain and beautify their towns. The institutes have also established libraries or arranged for circulating ones, erected war memorials and undertaken relief work when their communities have been struck by natural disaster. Welcoming newcomers to their towns or districts and helping to organize local and national celebrations have also been a part of their community service work.

Prior to the formation of the Women's Institutes, there were few organizations or groups in which rural women could become involved, and few opportunities for women in general to help shape policies which affected them. It was this void that the Women's Institutes filled. Providing an outlet for the creative energy of rural women, the institutes channeled this enthusiasm into worthwhile educational and community service projects.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The reader may want to consult a book entitled, *The Great Human Heart: A History of the Manitoba Women's Institute 1910-1980,* published by the Manitoba Women's Institute, (Winnipeg, 1980). An overview of the institutes' activities can also be found in Mary Speechly's *A Story of the Women's Institutes of Manitoba, 1910-1934,* published by the Advisory Board of the Women's Institute, (Winnipeg, 1934). A number of local histories also include references to the activities of the areas' Women's Institute.

For information on Adelaide Hunter Hoodless see, Mary Quayle Innis' book, *The Clear Spirit: Twenty Canadian Women and Their Time,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966).

Credits

The cover illustration was designed and drawn by Margaret Macfarlane.

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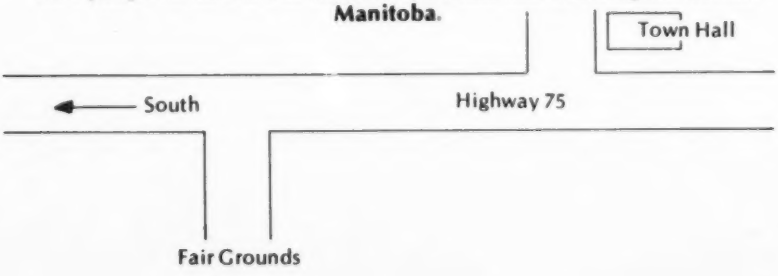
This plaque is located in front of the town hall building in Morris, Manitoba.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL